



## MY TURN by Lisa Markovitz

# Election effects on Howard's development plans

Back in 2021, Howard County began its once-in-a-decade update of development plans. A year of County presentations and community input ensued, yet the plan was put on hold in early 2022. It was perceived there weren't enough Council votes to pass the County's suggested huge increases in residential development. Implementing the plan was postponed until after the election.

Two Democratic primaries ensued with intensely critical campaigns against incumbent Council Members Liz Walsh and Deb Jung, who do not vote for extreme increases in development without regard for pacing needs such as school capacity, traffic, flooding, etc. At least, not for the small benefit of some minimal affordable housing provision. In District 1, incumbent Liz Walsh won her primary, and District 4's Deb Jung has won re-election, having no general election opponent. With these results, there will not be a higher likelihood of passing the County's original proposals. The chapters that are coming out now, need to be carefully reviewed.

There have been four chapter information releases. (See my Business Monthly column "Howard's Development Plan Update Continues" July 2022.)

The latest chapter, "Supporting Economic Prosperity", leads to many questions. A large focus of this chapter is on anticipated job increases in the County, and housing needed for such. Excellent suggestions were made regarding the need for vocational and job training assistance, but more attention needs to be paid to commercial real estate needs, transit, and school issues.

Residential zoning changes need to balance the need for commercial space, which is certainly evolving. The pandemic led to long-term increases in remote work. Yet, we still need offices and stores, especially food supplies. The County's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion focus group wisely advised that high rents are barriers to entry

for black-owned and young entrepreneurs.

The chapter notes that there is an excess demand for over 6 million square feet of commercial space than current County supplies. This data point is often ignored when talking about supply and demand factors in land use decisions.

The Spending Affordability Advisory Committee made a key recommendation to grow the local job base to expand revenue. Commercial growth brings higher tax revenue than residential, the latter also requiring more service expense.

Increasing jobs is a very important goal, which is more easily attained by increasing available commercial space. We need to add this across the county and not just in a Columbia-based/Gateway singular location. After all, the chapter also notes findings that a full shift to remote offices is not occurring, as we are seeing more hybrid spaces to inspire collaboration and team building. More good news, commercial space now creates far less traffic.

Proposed mixed-use centers in strategic locations will provide localized business space, but if combined with large density developments, there needs to be more attention on actual proximity to available transit, and regional overwhelming of schools.

Public input quoted as desiring more housing, especially more affordable, specifically emphasized that high density needed to be located near public transportation. A bus stop within five miles is not enough. More emphasis needs to be placed on getting long-term transportation needs addressed.

Recommendations to amend the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance (APFO), a set of regulations that govern development timing, are problematic. Adding "employment growth" as a determining factor in APFO would render it a useless planning tool. Hiruy Hagdu, a former member of the SAAC, stated "APFO is intended to manage school capacity and roads. What the County suggests would turn APFO on its head and lead to incompatible goals within the ordinance. The County's economic engine is its schools and yet, not a single page is dedicated to improve school level of service."

As we enter the implementation phase, let's hold our County Council and Executive accountable to carefully weigh competing needs for resources for the good of those in the County and those who may join us.